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Language and the Media: Seeing through the Newspapers

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Source: *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 2, LANGUAGE (JUNE 1984), pp. 187-197

Published by: India International Centre

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23001658>

Accessed: 30-09-2016 06:36 UTC

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## LANGUAGE AND THE MEDIA

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### *Language and the Media: Seeing through the Newspapers*

Alok Rai

... And so each venture  
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate ...

*T.S. Eliot*

Good prose is like a window pane

*George Orwell*

We have to cease to think if we refuse to do it in the prison-house of language. . .

*F.W. Nietzsche*

**N**EWSPAPERS constitute a privileged discourse in any society. They are a key element in the ideological apparatus, an influential determinant in the process of signification wherein and whereby a society crystallises its meanings, learns to think about and, so, see itself. The English language press of this country is not only a part of this privileged discourse, it is also, evidently, a discourse of the privileged. As such, it is of particular interest to anyone who is interested in the processes whereby social meanings are generated. Because, of course, while all meanings might be equal, some are inevitably more so. And the ways in which the powerful understand reality are not merely matters of academic interest; these forms of understanding feed back into reality by becoming, in turn, the determinants of actions, policies, interventions.

My sample for this investigation consists of copies of all the national English language dailies published during the first ten days of 1982. The original impulse for this enquiry derives from Orwell's

essay, *Politics and the English Language*, from Orwell's seminal insight that language is the terrain on which ideological conflicts are fought out. It is also implied, stretching the metaphor, that language is the strongest and subtlest weapon deployed in such conflicts. Thus, whether seen as terrain or tool, it is presumed that a diligent examination of language is likely to reveal significant injury, alteration, detail. Finally, in order to provide a workable focus for my investigation, I have confined myself to the newspaper coverage of a single macabre event which took place, as it happens, on New Year's Eve: the killing of ten lower-caste women and children in a village in western U.P. The name of the village was variously described in the papers as Sarhupur or Sadhupur; it could never be established satisfactorily which of the two is correct so I have, arbitrarily, opted for the latter.

Newspapers are, unless one is especially careful, endowed with an alarming transparency. There is, so their unstated project runs, a world in which events happen, and these events are, faithfully, mapped into the ideologically neutral discourse of the newspaper. News consists of objectively available 'facts', reporters are value-free, and the language of the papers is a eunuch, unaffected and unmarked by the bordello in which it is employed. This used to be a powerful position, but the news that the palace has been overrun might still take some time to filter down to the marketplace.

In academia, however, the recognition is becoming general that 'reality' is inherently formless, amorphous, and that it must therefore, and necessarily, be transformed, shaped, indeed, *formed* for human uses. Writing on *Interpretation and the Sciences of Man*, Charles Taylor has pointed out " . . . the artificiality of the distinction between social reality and the language of description of that social reality",<sup>1</sup> because, clearly, language is the primary means by which amorphous social reality is formed, endowed with contexts, rendered significant, made available for thought and action. An influential commentator on the processes of social signification, Stuart Hall, is categorical:

The patterns of meanings imposed on events, the logics of arrangement and presentation, are not given in the raw material; even when events have a meaning of their own, those meanings are modified and sometimes transformed, when they enter an already formed discourse or linguistic 'space'.<sup>2</sup>

The meaning of Sadhupur is affected whether it is the subject of a police investigation or a political pronouncement, a journalistic essay or an academic analysis of the various ways in which that meaning has been sought to be apprehended, and communicated.

The sophistication which we professionally, habitually, bring to bear upon the understanding of more obviously, self-consciously patterned forms of utterance, whether lyric poetry or realistic fiction, is, I believe, very much to our purpose here as well. Because the ordinariness of ordinary language is, after all, little more than the staleness of familiarity, which we need to shed in order to regard critically even avowedly 'literary' texts. As for the irreducible factuality of the world of newspapers, it provides no immunity from critical scrutiny. Not only is it the case that developments in documentary fiction, the fiction of fact sometimes called 'faction'—the examples that spring readily to mind are Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*—have destroyed any immunity that factuality might be said to provide. We have also suggested above that, for reality to be constituted as 'facts', certain specific acts of attention and transformation are essential. One might recall at this point Paul Fussell's elegant demonstration that "our access to events, even so significant an event as the Great War, must be through the makers of plots—that is, poets . . .".<sup>3</sup> Raymond Williams's warning to media analysts is apt and pointed. "The fact that certain events have undoubtedly occurred," he writes, should not be allowed "to conceal or to override the equally evident fact that as they move from events to news they are being narrated, and that certain longstanding problems of narration—the identity of the narrator, his authority, his point of view, his assumed relationship to his readers or hearers, his possible wider purposes in selecting and narrating these events in this way—come inevitably into question."<sup>4</sup> The tragic event in Sadhupur, therefore, is not my primary focus; it is, rather, the processes of signification through which that event has been sought to be understood. The killing of obscure individuals in an obscure place is, in a sense, both punning and precise, merely the pretext for this preliminary enquiry.

The relationship between language and ideology must, clearly, be an intimate one. Language is ideology's necessary element, the primary substance in and through which the forms of ideology—its arguments and ideas, its perceptions and conceptions—are constituted. Thus, it is difficult to disagree with R. Fowler and G. Kress when they write:

Language serves to confirm and consolidate the organisations which shape it, being used to manipulate people, to establish and maintain them in economically convenient roles and statuses, to maintain the power of state agencies. . . . This is effected partly by direct and indirect speech acts, partly by more generalised processes in which the theory or ideology of a culture or a group is linguistically encoded, articulated and tacitly affirmed.<sup>5</sup>

There are, however, a couple of important remarks to be made in this connection: firstly, whereas language is an insidious and subtle means whereby the dominance of the dominant is inscribed in the minds of their victims—Orwell buffs may recall here the tyranny of Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—, it is inherent in the necessarily generalised availability of language that it can also be used, within institutional limitations, to subvert that dominance. In attempting to do that, however, and this is my second point, one is liable to come up against the real world—not merely the flat-footed, fully armed minion of the state whose violence is the ultimate sanction of the power that first appears linguistically encoded, but also, crucially, the world of actuality itself, the solid, four-dimensional world which language both represents and articulates.

A happening out there, in reality so to speak, is comparable to an orphan, a friendless and unloved child who arrives at Bombay V.T. in search of fortune and amnesia. It takes a little while before it can be 'adopted' for various legitimate and illegitimate purposes. The fact of the killings was announced, flatly, in the agency handouts which appeared on New Year's Day, nestling cheek by jowl with the bits and pieces from here and there about ringing out the old year, ringing in the new:

A gang of outlaws shot dead 10 Harijans, including women and children, yesterday in Sadhupur village of Shikohabad tehsil of Manipur district.

(TOI, 1 : 1B)

The tone is bureaucratic, neutral, precise. Along with the basic information, one newspaper published, without comment, an item of information which may, arguably, be germane to an understanding of these macabre events:

On learning about the fresh killings on New Year's Eve, Chief Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh cancelled a scheduled Press conference and rushed to Delhi.

(HT, 1 : 1B)

Not Sadhupur, but Delhi—no doubt in search of consolation and enlightenment. The general response, among those who stayed, was that the crime was 'meaningless'. The Home Secretary declared:

No motive can be discerned in the murders. It is an act of sheer madness.

(IE, 1 : 1B)

The Home Minister declared that the crime was 'mad', but then proceeded to adduce a reason for it: the arrest of the husband of the cousin sister of the prime suspect, Anar Singh. (HT, 1:8H)

Others also could not leave the unlovely orphan unappropriated for too long, and the papers reported 'Cong-I sources' which, without any awareness of paradox, were able to

see the hidden hand of some caste-based Opposition party behind the killings of Harijans.

(HT, 1 : 1C)

This theme grew stronger as the days passed. Meanwhile, it was interesting to observe a quaint use of the word 'motivated'. Thus, a Mr. M was reported as saying:

the Sadhupur carnage was clearly a case of 'motivated' killings . . . the Government would leave no stone unturned to find out what the exact motive was and who the motivators were.

(IE, 2 : 7D)

A day after the 'cousin sister's husband' theory was advanced, the Home Minister made one more attempt at understanding this piece of recalcitrant reality, one more attempt to locate the 'meaningless' killings in a signifying context:

. . . the incident appeared to be politically motivated. She pointed out that the killers entered the village at the time the Prime Minister was addressing a public meeting in Lucknow.

(HT, 3 : 8G)

The very next day, yet another theory was produced, a more specific variant of the kind of appropriation which we have noticed earlier:

. . . the 'logical conclusion' of the circumstances involving the wanton killings was that a political force believing in violence and having a fascist and anti-democratic character was behind the murders.

(IE, 4 : 1C)

In a few days, however, the promise of this theory had dissipated, and a police spokesman was reduced to making the limp claim:

There is nothing to controvert the theory.

(PAT, 9 : 4F)

On the same day, in another paper, the Home Secretary made the same claim about another theory: that the murders had been committed by Anar Singh's gang; it, too, had not been contradicted by the evidence. (IE, 9:1A)

However, newspapers do not merely report the views of others with regard to the 'facts' which they render into 'news'. Nor do they confine themselves entirely to the lethally banal prose of the agency

handout, that stolid bureaucratese in which everything comes out grey and featureless. They do make attempts to structure the act of attention which they would ideally like to induce in the reader. Thus, the *Indian Express* of January 2 reported:

Ten dead Harijans lay wrapped in new cloth as their relatives in dirty and tattered attire waited solemnly for the helicopters to descend from the skies . . .

( 1A )

The juxtapositions are clearly 'meant': the dead bodies, the whirring ministerial helicopters, the new shrouds, the ragged garments of the living. Another paper, the *Patriot*, also saw the helicopters as an essential part of the context in which the deaths were to be understood. It reported an Additional Inspector General of Police instantly busying himself on the night the murders happened, not, heaven forfend, with investigations, but with preparing a helipad for the inevitable ministerial visitants. The bodies 'await inspection', but the Inspector General of Police assures us that

Investigations of the carnage will start seriously once these rituals are over.

(PAT, 3 : 1C)

Now, that word "rituals" is significant, because not only does it suggest a nicely deprecatory attitude with regard to all the ministerial fuss, it is also, faithfully reported, a knowing wink in the direction of the reader, a little gesture of complicity which implicates the reader and introduces yet another dimension into the act of attention through which, as it were, the "carnage" is being apprehended—indeed, constituted.

The *Indian Express* correspondent, reporting from Sadhupur itself on January 3, seemed to go to the emphatic heart of the matter when he identified caste hatred as the critical fact behind the tragic killings. However, this potentially analytical insight was squandered in the report itself, which consisted largely in explaining why the Harijans were the obvious victims for a rising wave of Thakur anger, a variant of the familiar strategy by which the victim is blamed for having brought the suffering upon himself. The clumsiness of the analytical operation is mirrored in the absurd metaphor with which he opens his report:

The virus of caste hatred which exploded in Deoli and which left in its wake more than 24 Harijans dead is spreading fast.

(IE, 4 : 7B)

A virus which explodes and leaves a wake? I suggest it is not mere

pedantry to balk at this, and ask whether the metaphors, clashing along, are advancing understanding, or merely obfuscating it. The viral/disease metaphor, the (warlike?) violence of the explosion, communicate the necessary sense of urgency, serve the function of emotional arousal; but as regards identifying the crucial social processes whereby and wherein murderous longings are generated and gratified, or offering any guidance as regards active interventions, the virus and the explosion simply cancel each other out, annihilate each other in a futile ecstasy of emotion.

The most serious and studied attempt to get at, to distil the meaning of these melancholy happenings, was made, in my opinion, in *Death in Sarhupur*, a report that appeared in the *Hindustan Times* of January 10. The immediately gratifying feature of this article is the sense the journalist conveys of the difficulty of his enterprise. In what way can such events really be understood? Is it enough to note the precise name and location of the village, the names of the dead, the names of the killers? Can analysis ever be adequate, or must one ineluctably reach out towards poetry and surrealism to articulate the grotesque truth of these happenings? Clearly, the genre within which one is working carries within it some in-built limitations: the journalist writing to meet a deadline cannot afford the brooding, meditative intensity which a novelist can bring to his task. But, even so, I find in the circling, fragmentary form of the report, an awareness of the elusive nature of reality, even one as evidently 'available' as these sudden, violent deaths.

The approach is foregrounded: "Take the Delhi-Kanpur-Calcutta road, National Highway Number 2". Even as we pick up circumstantial detail: "The dirt road that connects the village to the highway is full of potholes; the short journey is rather rough", we are, *simultaneously*, being placed in a specific relationship, not only with the observing consciousness, but also with that reality which we are moving to encounter: "On the way to Sarhupur you see families—mothers, fathers and children trekking out of the neighbouring villages. *They are carrying their life's savings . . .*" (italics added)

The journalist backs off, as if unwilling to intrude with such callow impatience: there is a section of background material on Anar Singh, that shadowy but violent figure whose presence hovers over these grisly events. There follows, cold, a caste profile of the village, fractured beyond all possibilities of community, except in sentimental idealisations. The journalist, looking for his clue, probes with ironies: the unkempt villager, recounting his "incoherent" grief to an immaculately dressed Minister. The Minister will go away to Lucknow, the



unkempt villager has lost three children. Reaching for the main events, the journalist notes briefly something that might well be significant: that on that fateful evening, all the men were away at a meeting to iron out some problems relating to the work they did for the glass-bangle factories of Firozabad. No simple peasants, these; but, while this detail was noted by a couple of papers, not one of them followed it up. Urban violence we can understand: the slumlords, the union-bashing goon squads, the riots; and we can understand rural violence: the traditional, revealed violence of a degenerate feudal society under pressure. But new meanings, new forms of understanding can emerge only when, under pressure from an evolving reality, new categories, new arrangements, new 'plots' have crystallised.

It is ironic that, in seeking to get to the heart of the matter, the journalist has to resort to reenacting the crime, to retracing the steps of the violent intruders, albeit armed only with a tape recorder and an observant eye—as if seeking to know if this imperative fashion were also a kind of violence. We enter one house, three children die. We enter the next one, and the woman who is cooking at the *chulha* ends up bleeding to death while the food gets charred. Another house, more deaths; and we notice, as we leave, the pathetic possessions that remain. The journalist resorts, again, to indirection: to subverting with an angry irony the political scavengers who are seeking, in their own callous ways, to appropriate the tragedy. These are, it must be said, soft targets for irony even though they are eminently deserving of irony, and worse; and resorting to it suggests, among other things, the rugged intractability of the central event. Still, to identify the scavengers as context, to locate the tragedy in a necessary relation to these systematic, ritualistic inhumanities, is to endow it with yet another kind of meaning. The text is modified by its context.

We are back, ultimately, with the conditions of discourse, the communication situation itself which sets an absolute limit, as it were, on the possibilities not merely of communication but implicitly, retrospectively, also of perception and meaningful understanding. Every communication situation necessarily carries encoded within it certain unspecified but specific notions of plausibility and coherence. And it would be an act of wilful naivete to believe that the minority English press which has, for better, for worse, a certain class audience is an exception. I think that Adorno's position in the following extract is overstated, and allows insufficient room for the possibility and reality of dissent, but it contains, nevertheless, an important insight into the intimate dialectic between thought and the possibilities of communication:

Not only does the mind mould itself for the sake of its marketability, and thus reproduce the socially prevalent categories. Rather, it grows to resemble . . . the status quo even where subjectively refrains from making a commodity of itself. The network<sup>5</sup> of the whole . . . leaves the individual consciousness less and less room for evasion, performs it more and more thoroughly, cuts it off *a priori* as it were from the possibility of differencing itself . . .<sup>6</sup>

To become aware of these limits, however, to become aware of the pressures and the implicit silences of the socially available categories, requires a struggle at the roots of the mind, of consciousness itself, because what is at issue is the shape of reality itself, and the processes whereby amorphous reality is endowed with that formed, familiar quality, the solace of recognition.

"Carnage," said the papers. A good, strong word, adequate to carry the necessary emotional change, the sense of accumulated brutality, etc. However, this charge was more often than not diminished by the phrase "an incident of carnage." Incident? I shall take shelter behind the authority of the O.E.D.:

1. Something that occurs casually in connection with something else; an event of accessory or subordinate character.
2. An occurrence viewed as a separate circumstance.

I do not think I am being pedantic and fussy when I insist that in describing the Sadhupur killings as an 'Incident' one is performing an ideological—here, precisely, a decontextualising, isolating—manoeuvre. It might be urged at this point that an 'incidental' view of reality is ingrained, inevitable in the genre of the newspaper. Maybe. But then it is crucial to recognise that this disconnection is not ideologically neutral. This precise amorphousness, the inhibited perception of pattern, itself becomes a kind of shaping, a studied, tendentious anarchy. (The formal parallel with the functioning of pluralist democracy in late-capitalist societies might be noticed here.) The refusal, or the inability to see the systematic linkages, works to suppress the violence which is inherent and ingrained in the 'normal' situation itself. An insistence on seeing these linkages, a refusal to see the killings as an 'incident', even of carnage, but rather as part of a pattern of inhumanity, would also be an ideological manoeuvre, a deliberate attempt to press a particular reading, a specific understanding of reality.

Repeatedly, in narrating rural violence, we notice that commentators resort to the form of the shattered idyll—" . . . the small and sleepy village . . ." (IE, 4 : 7B) where, as the shades of dusk gather, the

men assemble at the *chaupal* to discuss matters of consequence, the children huddle around the family *chulha* while the women cook the evening meal and tell stories no doubt—then, suddenly, this cosy domesticity is violently intruded upon, violated, irretrievably shattered—irretrievably, that is, until the next time. The *Hindustan Times* journalist was, as it happens, possessed of a powerful insight, in the form of a line from Graham Greene's *The Comedians*: "Violent deaths are natural deaths here." It is an insight which, assimilated, could transform the very basis on which the central event has been understood. But in order for that insight to be assimilated, the conditions of discourse themselves would have to be altered, the communication situation reconstituted. The good, conscientious, not inhumane newspaper reader is no doubt outraged by the "carnage", but he also shares with the policeman a dig at the political scavengers, to say nothing of his perhaps inarticulate and ambivalent and contradictory commitment to the social condition of which the "carnage" is an integral, regrettable part. It is a delicate equilibrium, and the corresponding ideological structures must necessarily be fabricated with the same degree of delicacy. So, the idyllic village persists, in the force of traumatic violence, the privileged child of ideology, the necessary ground of that other necessary myth: the myth of the alien disrupter, the 'Naxalite'. This is dangerous terrain, because here one is approaching a sort of limit of ideology. Forced beyond this point, ideology is compelled to recognise itself. In a perceptive speculation on the 'threshold of ideology', a western critic has ventured the optimistic opinion that ideology "cannot survive the traumatic recognition of its own repressed parentage . . ." But if it does, as is likely in fecund, tropical conditions, it is liable to turn nasty.

The questions we need to ask are: How much of 'reality' are we trying to understand? How far, in time and distance, are we prepared to follow the antecedent chains of circumstance which culminated in a traumatic 'newsworthy' event? What weight and consequence do we attach to the variably self-conscious attempts to grasp and form the event and its resonances, its reverberations? The answers one gives will be determined by one's ideological predispositions and will, once made, reinforce and perhaps modify these predispositions. Because the point, finally, is that 'reality' isn't simply waiting passively 'out there'; it is, in one sense, indifferent, persisting under the influences of its inherent dynamic; in another sense, it needs to be constituted by our acts of attention, the sensitivity which we, as readers and citizens, can bring to the varied and complex and paradoxical transactions between texts and contexts. 'Reality' is transfigured, formed by our acts of understanding. So also, in important respects, are we.

## REFERENCES

(Newspaper references are contained in the body of the text itself. The abbreviated names of newspapers expand obviously enough—TOI: *The Times of India*; HT: *Hindustan Times*; IE: *Indian Express*; PAT: *Patriot*; ST: *The Statesman*. All references are to the Delhi editions. The first digit in the reference identifies the date, the second the page number, and the final letter the column from which the quotation is taken. Thus, 3: 4- refers to the sixth column on page 4 of the newspaper issue of January 3, 1982.)

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2. 'Introduction' to A.C.H. Smith, et. al., *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change 1935-65*, London, 1975, p. 18.
3. See *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975).
4. 'Isn't the news terrible?', a review of *More Bad News* by the Glasgow University Media Group, in *London Review of Books*, II, 13 (July 1980), p. 6.
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6. Adorno, T.W., *Prisms* (London, 1967), p. 21.
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